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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER ADVOCATES "HALF PLUS
PLUS" PRESIDENT

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) DPM Elias Murr agreed that a status quo scenario, i.e., a continuation of President Lahoud's and PM Siniora's mandates, was the opposition's current strategy on the presidential election. The best way to avoid this scenario, he argued, was a "half plus plus" candidate -- one who might not be able to garner a two-thirds majority, but would be able to secure enough votes from the opposition to create a momentum to lead to his election. The advantage to this approach would be that March 8 could not claim that a "half plus plus" president (i.e., one that garnered more than simply the 68 March 14 MPs) is akin to a March 14 coup d'etat. Murr named Robert Ghanem as the candidate most suited to play this role. End summary.

MURR CONFIRMS RUMORS OF OPPOSITION STATUS QUO STRATEGY

2. (S/NF) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr on October 15 to discuss the latest scenarios for electing Lebanon's president. Murr confirmed rumors that the latest opposition strategy was to maintain the status quo (i.e., keep President Lahoud and PM Siniora in office past November 24) in hopes that diminishing support for March 14 would allow for the election of a president down the road who is more pro-Syrian rather than a consensus candidate now whose allegiance is not so clear. The legal rationale for extending Lahoud's mandate would be that Siniora's government, following the walk-out of six opposition ministers, is not constitutional, yet Siniora has remained in his seat; therefore, Lahoud should be able to do the same.

3. (S/NF) Murr said a Hizballah representative had called on Lahoud two days earlier, asking him to stay on with Siniora, and he had heard similar confirmation of this scenario from the Deputy PM of Qatar, who called him following the Qatari's meetings with Lahoud and Speaker Nabih Berri. The problem for March 8, Murr argued, is public relations: how to get to

November 24 without elections? March 8 is counting on March 14 to go through with its threats to elect a president using half plus one to discredit the majority.

14. (C) The Ambassador noted that this scenario had much to offer to some players, especially on the March 8-Aoun side. First, it pacifies Aoun, who keeps his hope of a presidential nomination alive, as do all the other contenders; second, it prevents Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman from having to make the difficult decision of who to support; third, the security situation does not get worse. On the other hand, it works against Saad Hariri's aspirations to become PM, and against the Patriarch's desire to see the Christians' role in the government revived through a new president. However, the game seemed to be to slow the clock in hopes that March 14 would slowly dwindle away. If indeed it appears that March 14 is losing support, it will create a downward spiral effect: wavering supporters like Tripoli MP Mohamad Safadi will switch to March 8, a pro-Aoun candidate probably will win the parliamentary by-election to replace assassinated March 14 MP Antoine Ghanem, the economy will suffer, and March 14 will suffer an electoral defeat in the 2009 parliamentary elections. Murr agreed with this analysis.

A WIN-WIN SOLUTION WITH ROBERT GHANEM AS PRESIDENT

15. (C) The solution, Murr suggested, is to for March 14 to outsmart March 8 by proposing a consensus candidate who can muster "half plus plus" votes; i.e., more than the 65 required for an absolute majority (in the 128-seat house) and more than the 68 MPs March 14 nominally still has, but less than the 86 needed for a two-thirds majority. A candidate who, by bringing on board some Aoun MPs and a few others, could reach 78 - 80 votes would create enough of a momentum behind his candidacy that would throw the opposition off balance and make it impossible for March 8 to protest. Berri

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would be cornered, the LAF would support this candidate, "neutral" countries like Qatar that oppose the half plus one formula would be relieved, the Patriarch would agree in the interest of restoring the presidency (albeit reluctantly, perhaps, depending on the candidate), and Hizballah would be able to tell Aoun it tried but failed to elect him. Furthermore, Murr continued, Syria and Hizballah would think twice before creating problems in the street if the president secured "half plus plus" support, for fear of being viewed as gangsters in the street or instigators of a Sunni/Shia conflict. With "half plus plus," March 8 could not claim that the presidential election was a March 14 coup d'etat.

16. (C) MP Robert Ghanem could be this candidate, Murr said; he could easily secure the immediate support of ten Aoun deputies; his father, Michel Murr, and Ily Skaff, both Aoun deputies, were sure bets. Ghanem is an MP, which also helps corner Berri. However, Murr agreed that March 14 would have to conceal this strategy until November 14 and maintain a united public front until then, otherwise March 8 would find ways to eliminate any prospects for a Ghanem presidency. The idea would be to choose a president out of tension; the Maronites fear Lahoud's continued occupancy of Baabda Palace, the LAF is anxiously waiting in the wings to see what will happen, Hizballah is slowly increasing its control over the country, UNSCR 1701 is in danger, the Patriarch fears for the Christians, the economy is sliding, diplomatic relations are under stress, ...then suddenly March 14 provides the solution in the form of a willingness to elect a consensus candidate.

17. (C) Ghanem, Murr contended, is "the most decent" and most "transparent" of all the presidential candidates and best in terms of not having "secret, under the table" contacts (i.e., with Syria or Iran). Murr claimed Druse leader Walid Jumblatt had sent Ghanem a message saying he would support him. Murr said both Geagea and Jumblatt were considering candidates other than Nassib Lahoud and Boutros Harb, like

Ghanem. He also said Saad Hariri had called Ghanem the day before urging him to see Geagea. Murr himself had advised Ghanem to hold a private meeting with Geagea to avoid having his candidacy "burned" before it began by being made public.

¶18. (C) The Ambassador noted that Ghanem, from the Biqa, lacks credibility with the Christian community, which generally prefers a president from the Christian Mount Lebanon region. Furthermore, his potential ties to Syria are a question mark; Ghanem, whose hometown faced intimidation from nearby Syrian troops, did not attend the March 14, 2005 rally leading to the birth of the Cedar Revolution. Murr agreed, stressing he was not defending Ghanem, but that it was a better outcome than losing six years to another overtly pro-Syrian candidate, especially since this will be a critical period for the Special Tribunal. The only completely non-Syrian candidate, he said, would be someone who could be elected only through a half plus one formula.

¶19. (C) Murr concluded with a warning: a half plus one president will create a situation in Lebanon more dangerous than those in Iraq or Gaza. Hizballah, al-Qaeda, and Sunni extremists are all present here, he said, and Lebanon does not have the benefit of 200,000 U.S. soldiers to help counter extremists. We must win politically, Murr stressed.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) While it is never entirely clear whom Murr is speaking for, we do see his self interest: By helping to create the conditions for successful presidential elections, he preserves his role in a future government. Yet we believe that Murr's fear is sincere that a "half plus one" president could provoke destabilizing violence. We like Murr's "half plus plus" idea in theory, but the question is how it works in practice. If Robert Ghanem's candidacy remains opposed by the Patriarch, Michel Aoun, and Samir Geagea, for example, he would have no Christian credibility (no matter how "plus plus" he is). We wonder if Minister of Justice Charles Rizk, a stronger character who proved his fortitude and courage with the fight for the Special Tribunal, might be able to garner "half plus plus" more easily (albeit it without the vote of Elias Murr's father Michel, who detests Charles for

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obscure local political reasons and never-forgotten past grudges).
FELTMAN